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Washington's policy on Nicaragua moving closer to the brink

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Foreign policy militants in the Reagan administration have been scanning the world for opportunities to lay to rest the ghost of Vietnam by overthrowing a government that can be called Marxist. Angola is perhaps the trendiest target at the moment, but Nicaragua remains the standby because it is nearby, weak and unpopular with most of its neighbors, and because so much effort has already been invested.

"No more Cubas, but also no Vietnams," the militants promise. It is central to their premise of tidy "low-intensity" wars that the Sandinistas can be felled without US ground forces.

This winter, as the administration asks Congress for \$100 million for the contras, the reality the militants dare not admit is that although Nicaragua seems vulnerable - in economic ruin and almost defenseless in key military categories such as airpower - the unsavory force the CIA has cobbled together cannot win with guns and money alone. The contras have

no political legitimacy in Nicaragua. They would have to be installed by US troops.

Although many Nicaraguans chafe under Sandinista rule, neither that discontent nor the fatigue of being besieged translates into support for the contras.

The administration portrays the contras as dedicated Thomas Jeffersons. They have just issued a set of high-sounding "principles and objectives" promising democracy. To most Nicaraguans, however, they are not credible patriots or democrats.

Edgar Chamorro, who was recruited by the CIA for the contra directorate, noted that 46 of the 48 military commands were held by former national guardsmen of the former dictator, Anastasio Somoza. He listened as colleagues on the directorate "talked mostly about recovering their lost wealth and privileged status." He became disturbed by contra atrocities and CIA control. When he testified about what he had witnessed, he was thrown out.

The contras have never lived down the identification of their leaders with Somoza. Plagued by their image and by internal divisions, contra leaders some

months ago created an umbrella group called UNO (United Nicaraguan Opposition). Adolfo Calero, the powerful right-wing leader, was camouflaged with moderates, such as Arturo Cruz, who have democratic credentials and a following in the US Congress.

The power has remained with the one who commands the guns - Calero. Ambivalent about his role as front man, Cruz has verged on quitting. In any case, he has no power.

The average contra soldier is a peasant from isolated regions similar to the backwaters of the Appalachians and holding conservative goals common in such areas, above all the wish to be left alone by the central government in Managua. Much of the killing for which the contras are notorious has resulted when such fighters have taken advantage of the US-sanctioned violence to pursue grudges that are not political, or at least have nothing to do with the pursuit of democracy as a civic ideal.

CIA and contra leaders have tried to channel this penchant for mayhem toward "political" targets such as teachers, health workers and other representatives of the Managua government. That has gruesomely neutralized some committed Sandinistas, but has not endeared the contras to Nicaraguans.

Because the contras are bankrupt of political support - the key area where liberation struggles are won or lost - the administration has tried increasingly to bill them as a winning team militarily. Last fall, administration officials spoke of steering the contras away from rural terror toward dramatic shows of force in urban areas. The new look never materialized.

Not only have the contras lost ground militarily during the past year while Nicaraguan defenses have improved, but they also have been unable to shake the reputation for savagery documented by Washington Post reporter Christopher Dickey in his book "With the Contras."

For the administration the only fruit of contra activity in 1985 was that it caused the Sandinistas to increase restrictions on civil liberties. That enabled the administration to decry a new wave of repression, but has not made the contras more popular or more effective militarily.

In the belief that avoiding US casualties is the only condition on which American voters will insist, administration militants vigorously reject the Vietnam analogy. They insist that ground fighting would never require Americans. Indeed, that is what they hope. What Congress must consider, however, is that as increasing US dollars and credibility are put on the line, the temptation to intervene is bound to increase.

It would be hard for administration militants to admit their plan has gone awry. They want much more than mere demilitarization of the Sandinistas, which is what the Contadora peace process offers. They need a victory.

What Congress must consider is that the administration's embarrassment will deepen if more treasure and prestige are committed to this dubious battle. When it has finally become clear that the contras cannot take power, even with hundreds of millions in lethal aid, who believes their militant US backers won't want to send troops?

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